



## Excessive Spending - An Ongoing Battle

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

For years, talk about excessive federal spending has been reminiscent of that old saying about the weather: “Everyone complains, but nobody does anything about it.”

But occasionally there is a glimmer of real hope – signs that the political power structure in Washington is finally getting the message. I’ve seen some indications of that in recent days. I hope these signs of possible reform are real, and not a mirage.

It often takes a vivid example of waste to focus attention on a problem. We got a bright flash last week when the Government Accounting Office (GAO) reported that up to \$1.4 billion in individual aid doled out after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita may have been spent improperly.

You may remember those \$2,000 debit cards the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) handed out last year so that homeless hurricane evacuees could buy food, clothing and temporary shelter.

Well, the GAO examined some of the actual expenditures. It found some relief money was spent on season football tickets, a vacation to Hawaii, and even a sex-change procedure. The cards were also used to pay for adult entertainment products, champagne and other alcoholic beverages, season tickets to New Orleans Saints games and an all-inclusive, one-week vacation at a Dominican Republic resort.

The agency said it found that people who lodged in hotels often were paid for twice, since FEMA gave them individual rental assistance and also paid hotels directly. FEMA apparently paid various California hotels \$8,000 to house one individual – the same person who received three rental assistance payments for both hurricane disasters.

Of course, this abusive fraud leads us to a much larger problem. The federal budget process is ineffective and broken. There are no short-term consequences when Congress increases deficit spending. In fact, there can be political “rewards” in all this when members of Congress bring home pork for their home districts. It’s time we took responsibility for fixing a budget system in disrepair – before today’s problem becomes tomorrow’s crisis.

President Bush has again asked for line-item veto authority. Congress is now moving to approve that as

part of a broader budget process reform effort. These changes are needed immediately. In only two short years, the Baby Boom generation will begin to retire, and expenditures for Social Security and Medicare will begin to skyrocket.

Last week, I joined with Budget Chairman Sen. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.) in introducing the Stop Over-Spending Act of 2006. It would require Congress to reduce growth of “mandatory,” entitlement spending if deficit targets are not met. It would also order across-the-board reductions in discretionary spending if Congress can’t meet established spending caps.

I introduced a companion bill setting up a bipartisan commission to attack waste and fraud in Medicare and Social Security. That commission will recommend ways to strengthen our largest entitlement program to ensure it can remain solvent indefinitely.

Up until now, attempts to deal with this growing fiscal problem have bogged down in partisanship. While we’ve dithered, the problem has grown more severe, and devising a solution has become much more difficult.

I may be overly optimistic, but I’m seeing a new willingness in Congress to face up to our more egregious over-spending. Under the threat of the President’s first veto, Congress last week reduced an emergency spending supplemental bill – additional funding for Iraq and hurricane relief – from a previously approved \$108.9 billion to a more acceptable \$94.5 billion.

Only in the wonderland of Washington would an additional expenditure of \$94.5 billion be considered a sign of progress. But it’s a start – and the longest journey starts with a single step.

*Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.*

*For Sen. Cornyn’s previous Texas Times columns: [www.cornyn.senate.gov/column](http://www.cornyn.senate.gov/column)*